

DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE BLOGGERS ROUNDTABLE WITH BRIGADIER GENERAL JOSEPH ANDERSON
III, CHIEF OF STAFF, MULTINATIONAL CORPS-IRAQ, VIA TELECONFERENCE FROM IRAQ
TIME: 11:00 A.M. EST DATE: FRIDAY, DECEMBER 7, 2007

Copyright (c) 2007 by Federal News Service, Inc., Ste. 500 1000 Vermont Avenue,
NW, Washington, DC 20005, USA. Federal News Service is a private firm not
affiliated with the federal government. No portion of this transcript may be
copied, sold or retransmitted without the written authority of Federal News
Service, Inc. Copyright is not claimed as to any part of the original work
prepared by a United States government officer or employee as a part of that
person's official duties. For information on subscribing to the FNS Internet
Service, please visit <http://www.fednews.com> or call (202)347-1400

(Note: Please refer to www.dod.mil for more information.)

CHARLES "JACK" HOLT (chief, New Media Operations, OASD PA): Brigadier
General Joseph Anderson is with us this morning for the Bloggers Roundtable.
He's chief of staff for Multinational Corps- Iraq.

Sir, do you have an opening statement for us?

GEN. ANDERSON: I do. I've got a few comments, Jack, if I can.

MR. HOLT: All right, sir.

GEN. ANDERSON: All right. Good morning to you all. Thanks for
talking to us this morning. Good to be with you from beautiful downtown
Baghdad.

As you all know, we continue to see attack levels in a downward trend
from this past June, at their lowest level since January '06, so a great
degree of progress. It's also clear that, in working with our Iraqi security
force partners, that we've created a window of opportunity for the Iraqi people
to achieve their goals of security, a level of security that will now allow
governmental, economic and social advances to move forward.

Success here, we believe, is within the grasp of the people. We saw it
here the past few months, based on the surge, to diminish safe havens and
sanctuaries during major offensive operations, such as Fard al-Qanun. And just
a reminder, that began back in January; Phantom Thunder, which began in June;
and Phantom Strike, which began in August.

We aimed at eliminating places where al Qaeda and Shi'a extremists
operated. The trends to date suggest that we've been pretty successful in doing
that. We must not, and we won't, allow ourselves to get ahead of results on the
ground. There is still violence against the Iraqi people by extremist elements.
For example, here about two weeks ago, extremists disguised an improvised
explosive device as a box of goods and exploded it in the market in central
Baghdad, killing eight innocent civilians and wounding 25 more, as well as three
Iraqi policemen.

This kind of indiscriminate attack against the people is what has led
to a rejection of extremist methods. The Iraqi people continue to show defiance

against the criminals. That market remains open today and is flourishing, which is the good news. This is testimony to the resolve of the Iraqi people.

The signs are clear that the people at the grassroots level don't agree with the extremist views held by these fringe radical elements and the various sectarian groups. It also shows, though, we still have work to do.

As further evidence of the Iraqi citizens' resolve, the Concerned Local Citizens program continues to improve the security and stability of neighborhoods throughout the country. More than 70,000 volunteers nationwide have stepped forward to reinforce the work of the Iraqi army and Iraqi police in securing the population.

They are providing valuable knowledge on the neighborhoods to coalition forces, which degrades the capacity of the extremists to establish footholds from which they can conduct their attacks. These volunteers are localized and controlled by the Iraqi Security Forces. They demonstrate loyalty to the government of Iraq and operate in places where there are not a high number of Iraqi Security Forces conducting operations.

Reconciliation is also a key component of long-term development of the government of Iraq. It's vital to reducing violence and regaining a sense of normalcy. The significance of this enhanced security is that it allows our efforts in other components of long-term security and stability to take root. Significant improvements in essential services are critical to the confidence of the people and the effectiveness of their government. Delivery of basic services is also vital to making strides in economic development.

We know that in moving forward, jobs and job creation are vital to the confidence of the citizens and their government. The ability gained through an improved economy cannot be replaced by added security measures indefinitely. From the delivery of microgrants for small businesses to creating a fertile ground for major industry, the people need jobs to create a better future for their families.

Of course, our goal is to continue improving security to increase these opportunities. We have seen in recent weeks a steady flow of Baghdad displaced citizens returning to the city from neighboring countries. They are hearing of the improvements on the ground and are seeing the changes for themselves.

These returns will continue making economic improvements all that much more important. We do know, though, that much work still remains. While al Qaeda is disrupted and off-balance at the coordinated level, individual actors are still capable of executing deadly attacks. Such individuals will use opportunities to attempt attacks designed to draw media attention, instill fear, and to influence political decision-making.

Militant criminal elements of Jaish al-Mahdi, in flagrant violation of Muqtada al-Sadr's -- (inaudible) -- recent attacks have also shown a willingness to conduct individual attacks, often against innocent civilians.

The vigilance of the people, the competence of the Iraqi Security Forces and the coalition forces is cause for optimism. Security has greatly improved. Now is the time for addressing the other elements of life in a large, diverse country. Iraq has enormous natural resources, as you all know, educated and creative people, and the possibility to realize some of the promise of this great land.

Nothing will come easily, and tough days remain, and we realize that every day. The Iraqi people are dedicated to a better life, as are we. And hopefully together we can move forward.

Thanks for your patience on that one. Thanks for your time. And I'll welcome any questions that you have.

MR. HOLT: All right, sir. Thank you very much.

Charlie Quidnunc, you are first on line, so why don't you get us started?

Q Thank you very much. General Anderson, thank you for your service. I'm Charlie Quidnunc with the Wizbang podcast.

My question has to do with --

GEN. ANDERSON: Hi, Charlie.

Q Hi. My question has to do with refugees. Do we keep any information on how many people left their homes and if any are returning to their formally abandoned areas, now that the violence is coming down?

GEN. ANDERSON: We're keeping track on who's coming back. We have a very difficult time understanding how many actually left. There's not -- there's no current record that would help us do that. Most of it's hearsay. Now the issue becomes, as they return to their neighborhoods, trying to figure out when they left, why they left, where they went, and again, what their expectations are when they get back.

So we are just starting to see the return. The first batch of around 300 were last week; not sure how frequent or routine it's going to be, but the government of Iraq is very focused on getting them back. And now the challenges are, where do they live, how do they gain livelihood, and how do they take care of their families?

Q Thank you.

MR. HOLT: Okay, Marvin.

Q Yes, sir.

Thank you, General, for your service and for your time today.

GEN. ANDERSON: Thank you.

Q This is Marvin Hutchens with ThreatsWatch.org.

I'm wondering, sir, if you could tell us about the status of the Iranian rat lines, as reported by Bill Roggio recently, and their efforts or activities in support of the militants on the Shi'a side of things.

GEN. ANDERSON: Okay. The rat lines have been greatly neutralized here in the last couple of months. They still exist. The primary ones are from the southeast, from Shaibah all the way up through Diyala are the main access routes.

What has affected their success previous to that is the ports of entry have been reinforced; new facilities, enhanced training for the border guards and the border transition teams that are out there helping them be successful; the arrival of the Georgian brigade down in Wasat Province, which is based in Camp Delta, which is al Kut. They have put a whole series of backstop checkpoints, both temporary and permanent, which have greatly influenced their ability to move things freely, and then all the operations in the -- I'm sure you've heard the term -- all of you have heard the term the "Baghdad belt," but that ring around Baghdad where a lot of this stuff, everything from Balad over to Baqubah down to Salman Pak, all the "fiyahs" down here down south of Camp Victory -- Latafiyah, Yusufiya, Iskandariyah, Mahmudiyah -- all the way over to Fallujah.

That ring had commonly been where all that stuff, the rat lines, used to come in, and the pieces, components of IEDs, EFPs, other explosive devices used to all be assembled, vehicle-borne IED factories, et cetera.

But the success in that belt, interrupting the flow, and, of course, all the operations up in Diyala here since the summertime, has pushed most of that stuff out to Mahmudiyah and further north, has really affected their ability to come into Baghdad; the Georgians down in the center Wasat, and then, of course, the (POEs ?), everything from really Basra all the way up to Diyala.

Q Thank you, sir.

MR. HOLT: Okay, Ward.

Q Hey, General. Ward Carroll, Military.com and DefenseTech.org. Thanks for talking to us today.

GEN. ANDERSON: Thanks.

Q Is your sense that this trend is a function of the surge or the grassroots sort of uprising, or both?

GEN. ANDERSON: Our sense is that without the surge -- we all commonly agree, without the extra boots on the ground, this all wouldn't have turned. I think that's number one.

Number two is the support capability, manning, training, equipping of all the Iraqi Security Forces -- army primarily, police secondarily. And then you can get down to everything we just talked about, the borders and everything. All those areas have greatly improved.

But the success in making the ISF more capable, the fact that the Iraqis had the rotation plan which brought units from outside of Baghdad into Baghdad, changes in leadership, better facilities, et cetera, has made a huge difference.

And then the third part kind of refers to what you're talking about, the grassroots part, this whole reconciliation effort, the fact that people starting out in Al Anbar and now migrating all the way up to the north and the south, where people are just fed up with having stuff blown up and, you know, everything else, their quality of life being disturbed, have all given way together.

And this Concerned Local Citizens program is working hugely, both in terms of providing security and in terms of providing information. So we think it's the combination of those three things.

Q Okay. Thanks, General.

GEN. ANDERSON: You're welcome.

MR. HOLT: And Jared?

Q Yes, sir. Thank you for your time, General. Could you talk a little bit about the assimilation of the CLCs into the Iraqi National Forces -- either the police, the IP or the army -- and a little bit more about the atmospherics, about the morale of the Iraqi officers and lower echelon people that you work with as far as how they view the situation?

GEN. ANDERSON: Okay. The first part: The CLCs are going to kind of be assimilated in about a 20 -- we think of the about 72,000 that we have in the ranks now, about 20 to 25 percent of them are going to be assimilated into the Iraqi security forces, primarily the police. The police are the main venue, and for example, right now there's 3,500 of them down in Diwaniya who are going to be integrated into the police down in the Center South Area, as we call it. That's exactly what happened out west in Anbar -- similar progress up north. But primarily based on the whole purpose of CLCs is to provide security where security doesn't exist because the ISF aren't there and to allow these volunteers to potentially move into a permanent security force position. So that's the secondary reason they exist.

So we're thinking about 25 percent of them. It may be a little better than that. The army will be the smaller proportion of that, although we're exploring right now up north if we can actually put more in the army because that's where we have some more voids. So that's kind of that variable.

The other piece is how many of them may stay on in government. Right now about half of the group of the 72,000 are on a contract with us to perform -- to primarily perform static security -- checkpoints, protect infrastructure, those types of things. We're hoping that the government of Iraq -- all indications are they're willing to do that under the Ministry of Interior -- put them under contract to do similar like the old Force and Protection Service -- the old FPS that used to be here.

And then the other -- another percentage will actually have job-related work programs that will allow them to go either to a vo-tech or be hired into a community-based service corps, which they will go ahead and transition and the provinces will put them on a payroll to go do -- well, projects that they -- whatever they deem, everything from building houses for homeless to major infrastructure repair, those types of things. So that's that part.

On the leadership/morale part, I think there's still cleaning out to do. I think the average Iraqi army official is understanding the merits of what all these programs are. They're -- depending on which province and who you're talking about, there are varying degrees of pushback, resistance, concern over some of the things like CLCs. But by and large because of the progress they're seeing, it's mostly a supportive posture. And because they finally see a lot of the equipment and their capabilities enhancing and actually a different system from everything from how people get recruited to trained to how they get selected to be commanders around here -- all those programs have gotten a lot

healthier, if you will. So most of them view these current operations and the potential very favorably.

MR. HOLT: All right. Bill? Bill Ardolino, you still with us?

Q I'm here. I'm sorry, I had the button mute. (Laughs.)

General, Maliki has appointed a national follow-up council for reconciliation that apparently seems genuinely interested in doing a good job towards reconciliation. But U.S. advisers working on various aspects of reconciliation still complain that his very centralized -- Maliki's very centralized government blocks progress on certain reconciliation efforts. The Washington Post has named his circle of Dawa advisers as the main players who are influencing him to delay because of sectarian mistrust. Beyond hiring -- two-part question: Beyond hiring CLCs, what does a successful reconciliation effort for Maliki's government look like to you, and who are the players with influence on sectarianism-based hold-up in the Iraqi federal government?

GEN. ANDERSON: I think CLC is probably the test case that's shown a fairly good willingness to integrate different sects -- and again, in this case we're talking Sunni, obviously -- into some kind of apparatus.

But what I would tell you even before that, though -- the vetting of the IPs -- the Iraqi police -- there was clearly a void in Baghdad where the majority of police -- virtually all the police were Shi'a and there were no Sunni. So I would -- I'd tell you even prior to the CLC initiative, which really began rudimentarily in the spring out west and developed very firmly here in the summer nationwide, was the blending, mixing, better integration -- and again, primarily Sunni -- of the IPs. So I think that's been probably the best indicator of where they're going to go.

I think in terms of what you're talking about, other venues would obviously be -- it's very provincially based. I think you all realize that. So it's kind of hard -- it's not going to look the same everywhere. And I think as you look at how it tries to get blended in some of the more mixed areas -- Baghdad, obviously, and to the north -- obviously the south isn't much of an issue because it's Shi'a competition. The west is Sunni. So we're really talking about, you know, north, northeast, north-central Iraq. That's the real test case in terms of who gets to -- Tamin, Salahuddin, Nineveh, Diyala I guess would be probably the best four examples. And if you look at Diyala, everything from how the Diyala Support Committee was formed to how the Diyala Operations Command was stood up to everything going on in Samarra -- a lot more balanced approach.

So the key players in all of that are -- the two key ministers that affect who goes where, who does what, who gets hired, and who moves where is obviously the minister of Defense, Abd Al-Qadir, and the minister of Interior, Bulani. Obviously he's got inner circles -- everything from Rubaie -- and of course he's got this -- and I'm going to forget the acronym, but -- the IFGINIR (ph) -- but it's his little council on reconciliation who kind of screens the names.

But what I'll tell you favorably is they have been very willing to go out and travel around and visit and engage all over the place to get a feel for what's going on and see who's doing what. And again, test case is right down here in Southern Baghdad and the West Rashid area -- again, a mixed area where cooperation is going on. I mean, you don't -- not a lot of pushback in terms of

getting different people to come up and be players in all of this. Again, it's not perfect -- it's far from it, but it's -- all indications are that it's moving forward, not being stagnated by sectarian bias as much as I would say we clearly saw evident a year ago when we first got here.

Q Okay. So beyond the CLCs, what are the other -- and when you say that the test cases are in Diyala and all those other areas, you're talking specifically about the CLCs. Beyond the CLCs --

GEN. ANDERSON: No, no, I'm talking about actual security. What I was talking about was the actual police and Iraqi security forces. So how the leadership of the army and the leadership of the police -- but the actual integration of Sunni police into Baghdad is what I was also talking about, the well -- a whole separate entity from the CLCs.

Q And then you're saying that that is a test scenario on the table or that it's happened or it's --

GEN. ANDERSON: No, it's actually happened. No, no, the further test will be as you go further north in those provinces I mentioned in the more mixed areas, how that continues on. Diyala is indicative that it's going to continue in that direction as well, so it's the blending of the actual no-kidding, Ministry of Interior -- primarily Ministry of Interior police force where you get more of a balanced mix than what it was before, separate from CLCs.

Q So when you see these -- GEN. ANDERSON: The CLCs -- go ahead.

Q So when you see these articles in The Washington Post and The New York Times saying that reconciliation is being held up by sectarian players within the national government, you don't think that that's the case or --

GEN. ANDERSON: Well, I think it depends on how -- it depends on how you define "reconciliation." Reconciliation at the local level I think is making great progress. I think what you're probably reading about in the national press is at the central government level, and that's all the infighting and the Council of Representatives.

Obviously, based on the composition of provincial councils, based on the mix of the demographics of the populous, like I just said, in many of the provinces it's not an issue, because it's not a factor. In Dhi Qar, Muthanna, Basra -- you know, those type places like Anbar -- again, are you talking a Shi'a only or are you talking more of the mixed areas?

And I think the real test will be at the national level in terms of division ministers, Council of Representatives members -- those types of positions I think is more what you're reading about in the press about. How does it manifest itself at the national level at some point, which is ultimately the true indicator of reconciliation, obviously driven by -- it should be driven by, just like it is elsewhere, the demographics of the population, and then of course of the region locally, regionally and nationally. So I think that's the ultimate test which, I would think most people say we're not there yet. I think we've still got a long way to go, but that's the ultimate test.

MR. HOLT: Okay. And we've got a few minutes left. Has somebody else joined us online?

Q Yeah. It's Richard Lowry from op-for.com.

MR. HOLT: Okay, Richard. Go ahead.

Q I'd like to expand on the conversation right before now. And that is, isn't it true that reconciliation should start from the local and regional levels and work its way up into the government? And to try to have a democracy formed from the top down is really not the way to go?

GEN. ANDERSON: Oh, I -- that's exactly our position. That's why the provincial -- the multinational corps, who you're talking to -- we are focused provincially. But we agree, you know, neighborhoods, districts and provinces is what we're focused on. Partnered with our provincial reconstruction teams and our brigade combat teams, we are focused on exactly what you just said. And we don't -- none of us believe here that if you don't get the grassroots level fixed first, you can't drive the top down. You've got to drive the bottom up. What you just said is exactly what we believe.

Q Well, thank you, General. And you're doing a great job. MR. HOLT: Okay.

GEN. ANDERSON: Well, thank you.

MR. HOLT: Was there anyone else? Okay.

Do we have any follow-up questions? Well, all right.

Q General, this is Captain Bart Buechner calling from Readiness Command Region Northwest for the Navy.

I just was curious to whether you had any observations about how well we're preparing our reservists from a situational awareness standpoint to be engaged in what's going on with what we have them doing in theater presently.

GEN. ANDERSON: I think very well. I mean, they come from a variety of places and a variety of services, as you know. But I will tell you, every role they're playing here from PRTs to staff officers to PTTs and a whole variety -- and military training teams -- the folks I come across at the Phoenix Academy, the COIN Academy and out and about get it very well.

And I would just say generally speaking, that's not just the reserves. That's an active thing. Because of the experience most folks have been here multiple times and there's a danger there that you revert back to your previous experience and not necessarily think about what's changed, but most guys/gals come in here and reassess and get a -- you know, take the time to figure out what's changed from before, but grasp it very well and do very well.

Q Thank you, sir.

MR. HOLT: Okay. Any other follow-ups?

Q Richard Lowry again.

I have a question about something you commented on in your opening remarks and that is Iraqi civilians returning to Baghdad, in albeit small numbers now. You talked about looking for a place for them to live. Several neighborhoods last year were ethnically cleansed. They had been mixed

neighborhoods. Do you think these people are going to have the opportunity to return to their homes in these mixed neighborhoods?

GEN. ANDERSON: That's the challenge we have right now. The goal, obviously, is a goal from whence they came, but the challenge is proper land ownership and that's all the legality here that the government's trying to sort through.

They've identified homes -- and again, it's very -- it's been this way since I was here before and it doesn't change. It's very hard for us to figure who the rightful owners are in these neighborhoods. But the goal is, yes, they go back but there's a whole bunch of cleansed homes, I guess is the best way to say it, that are going to be -- that are probably going to be contentious.

The first return went smoother than we thought it was going to go, but as the numbers increase and/or the frequency increases, it's probably going to get a little bit more challenging.

Q I think that's a critical element too, because if people can return to their own homes, that will just accelerate the -- all the other good things that are happening in the city.

GEN. ANDERSON: Oh, I think you're -- yeah, I think you're right. It's not our program, which I think is also phenomenal. And the government of Iraq is truly -- they feel that success cannot be declared here until people get to return to their homes and resume a life of normalcy, which I think is -- you know, I think it's really commendable.

Now, the question is going to be the resources required, the time required, the capability to do that. It's awful hard to plan for, as you know, because some people return as not part of a formal return process. They just get back, depending on when they were displaced too.

So that is -- I'll tell you, it's awesome. I think what you just said is correct. The issue's going to be if it backfires and we get more in and we can't do all the right things and we start having, you know, more unemployed, more homeless, or you know --

Q Security issues.

GEN. ANDERSON: Yeah, that's correct. It will clearly impede security if that happens. And of course, discontent -- the infrastructure return to normal services is going to be, again, an ongoing process here for a long time, because of how old the infrastructure was and how poorly maintained it was and oh, by the way, increased demand. So when you exacerbate that now with more folks coming back, all those things can make -- can obviously make things a little bit more tense.

Q Right. And you have the momentum now. You want to maintain that momentum and not have things turn it around.

GEN. ANDERSON: Correct. That's correct, but it's awful hard to say, you can't come home. So that's one of those potential double-edged swords, but you've got to try. And obviously, we've got to try and meet the needs of the people, meet what the government's trying to achieve. And the key thing is we

do it in a planned, prepared manner. That's probably the most important piece of it.

MR. HOLT: All right, sir. Thank you very much. General Anderson, do you have any final, closing thoughts for us? We're about out of time here, but anything else you'd like to leave us with?

GEN. ANDERSON: No. They asked good questions. Thanks for your attention. Thanks for your interest. Those were all good topics. And again, the progress is very visible, tangible. The key thing is trying to expand that to the economic, governance signs of life and there's plenty of good signs in the economics arena as well. But that is a tougher nut to crack is to get this economy shifted from a security-based economy to a capital-based economy. And again, the potential is clearly here. It's getting all that in place and we see progress.

And I think this is going to be a great -- I think the upcoming year, without losing the momentum that was just described a couple of minutes ago -- it's key that we stay in that momentum. And the security is achieved. We can't lose that and let other aspects of life return to normal here. So that's the key piece this coming here.

MR. HOLT: All right, sir. Thank you very much.

Brigadier Joseph Anderson, the chief of staff for Multinational Corps Iraq with us this morning for the Bloggers Roundtable. And hopefully we can speak again, sir.

GEN. ANDERSON: Okay. More than willing to.

MR. HOLT: All right, thank you, sir.

GEN. ANDERSON: All right, thanks. You all have a good night -- day.

END.